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SALT II Strategy

President Ford has quietly changed from impartial arbiter of arms control disagreements within his administration to forceful advocate of the State Department's latest SALT option, which hard-liners claim flirts with disaster for the U.S. and the west.

Assuming Mr. Ford's nomination and subsequent freedom from Ronald Reagan's restraining influence, he is expected to press hard for another strategic arms limitation (SALT) treaty with the Soviet Union before the Nov. 2 election. What's more, it is now clear that Mr. Ford is prepared to buy that treaty at high cost: sacrificing U.S. cruise missiles while the Soviets keep their new Backfire bomber.

The last line of resistance is held by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In recent top secret meetings, they have been unusually tough and plucky in standing up to the President and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. But Mr. Ford seems so determined to have a SALT II agreement this fall that there is little optimism the Pentagon will prevail.

A SALT II treaty has been prevented for 18 months by two new weapons systems considered to be in the gray area of strategic weapons: the Soviets have the Backfire bomber; the U.S. has miniature-motored cruise missiles, which can be launched from planes or ships and which Moscow cannot duplicate today. The question: shall they be included in the limit of 2,400 offensive delivery vehicles each for the U.S. and the Soviet Union agreed to by Mr. Ford and Secretary Leonid Brezhnev at Vladivostok in 1974?

Several options were before the National Security Council (NSC) July 30 when it considered arms control for the last time before the Kansas City convention. But the option generating attention is Dr. Kissinger's latest proposal, regarded by many experts as certain to win Soviet assent.

It would limit cruise missiles by counting them under the strategic ceiling, delivering a fatal blow to the weapons system the Pentagon considers vital for conventional warfare. But the Kremlin would be permitted to go ahead producing (under a meaningless special ceiling) Backfire bombers, air refuelable and possessing obvious strategic potential.

In return, the Soviet Union would be forced to make this supposed concession: a reduction in the 2,400 strategic vehicle ceiling—perhaps by 100, perhaps 200, perhaps even more. The argument for the Kissinger option boils down to this: If Moscow is really prepared to reduce its overall nuclear war-making ability, why quibble over a few

To make this argument, it is necessary to prove that the Backfire is not and could not become a strategic weapon. Accordingly, Kissinger's position is strengthened by a top secret study of the Backfire, performed by McDonnell-Douglas Corp., under contract to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), showing a Backfire one-way range of only 3,400 miles.

Furious Pentagon experts, cursing both the CIA and McDonnell-Douglas, call the study worthless and claim the Backfire is a true strategic weapon with a 6,000-mile range.

Moreover, the Kissinger option does not even consider yet another gray-area weapons system developed by ingenious Soviet technicians: the SS-20 missile. While claimed to be just short of intercontinental range, it could be hastily converted into a strategic weapon. Thus, the Kissinger option would permit development of two potentially strategic Soviet systems, the Backfire and the SS-20, outside the strategic ceiling—no matter how low that ceiling goes.

The military chiefs, more passive than Pentagon civilians in recent years, are now fighting hard over SALT II. The estimable Gen. Frederick Weyand, lame duck Army Chief of Staff and long the toughest of the chiefs, has been joined by Gen. George S. Brown, recently confirmed for another term as chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Brown's conversion may have been influenced by the prodding in secret confirmation hearings by hard-line Sen. Henry M. Jackson, who ended up voting for him.

The real hopes of the hard-liners rest with Secretary Rumsfeld. Normally a trimmer, he is now talking plain and hard: the Backfire is a strategic weapon, no matter what the CIA says, and it is intolerable to permit the Backfire while sacrificing cruise missiles. That's what Rumsfeld is saying not only privately but in high-level meetings.

Were Rumsfeld and Kissinger in a great debate for the President's mind, the issue would be in doubt. But the Gerald Ford of 1976, after so much time at Dr. Kissinger's side, is not the strategic arms neophyte who entered office 24 months ago on Aug. 9, 1974. "It would be wrong to call Ford a puppet of Henry," says one well-informed hard-liner on Capitol Hill. "I think he is now a convinced and committed disciple."

If this is correct, it is difficult to imagine the Pentagon staging a real revolt. That is why the Ford administration, in what could be its final major act, may exchange reduced overall strategic limits for clear Soviet advantages in gray-area systems—a cost military experts say is much too high to pay.